

Million dollar grant for innovative online project

by Erin Prenoslo
 (Jul 3, 2009)

As every undergraduate learns early on, citing Wikipedia in an academic paper won't usually get you into your professor's good books.

But what if you could combine Wikipedia's collaborative production strategy with the peer-review standards of a respected academic journal?



Susan Brown

For Susan Brown, Professor of English & Film Studies at the U of A and lead researcher on the new Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory project (CWRC), the idea was worth over a million dollars in funding from the Canadian Foundation for Innovation's Leading Edge Fund.

CWRC will encompass an integrated online database of primary texts by Canadian writers, scholarship by Canadian academics, and geographical and historical information. A user-friendly search system will allow researchers of all skill levels (from elementary students to university professors) to access the information in the digital archives and to study relationships between the sources.

For example, a researcher could pull up a map of early Canadian booksellers and compare it with a list of texts published in that area to investigate how publishing infrastructure affected writing. Or they could locate their text on a timeline of events to see the effects of the introduction of the railway or a change in government policy.

Brown stresses that one of CWRC's main innovations will be its emphasis on producing information specifically for digital formats. "A great deal of the scholarship that's online now is kind of a mimicry of print forms," she says. "It doesn't really leverage the power of computing except in some very basic ways - for instance, to deliver it to people's screens very quickly." Brown's team hopes to find more strategic ways of using computers in humanities scholarship: as tools for finding new links and for presenting data in new ways, not just as "hyped-up card catalogues and typewriters."

Brown's ultimate goal for CWRC is to provide as much information as possible by open access. "What we want to do is create a resource with high community value and wide community buy-in, and we want it to be widely available," she says. "We hope it will become the first stop for anyone wanting to research Canadian writing."

The CWRC team hopes to reach beyond Canadian universities to raise the profile of our literature internationally, to encourage the teaching and sales of Canadian material at home and abroad and to improve the digital literacy of the next generation of Canadian leaders.

CWRC will build on the achievements of the Orlando Project, a database of women's writing in the British Isles which was spearheaded by Brown and her colleagues Patricia Clements, Isobel Grundy and Stan Ruecker. Other major CWRC contributors at the U of A include Marie Carrière (Director of the Canadian Literature Centre), Eleni Stroulia (Computing Science), Arie Croitoru (Earth & Atmospheric Science), Ofer Arazy (Business) and Geoffrey Rockwell (Philosophy/Humanities Computing). The CFI grant extends for four years, and Brown hopes the basic platform will be in place within two years.

Related Links:

The Orlando Project
<http://www.ualberta.ca/ORLANDO/>

Department of English & Film Studies
www.arts.ualberta.ca/efs/

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